

Book Reviews

Thomas Ferguson & Joel Rogers, *Right Turn. The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986. 276 pp.

The development of American history is often described in terms of cycles. The general idea is that periods of social activism alternate, in a reasonably predictable pattern, with periods of private concern. The pendulum, so we are repeatedly told, commonly swings from liberalism to conservatism, from reform to reaction, from public purpose to private interest. The terminology varies and does not always convey a sense of clarity or precision.

Henry Adams, writing in the 1890s, applied the cyclical thesis to the first years of the American republic. According to him a period of about twelve years measured the beat of the pendulum. Arthur Schlesinger Sr., in an essay published half a century later, identified no less than eleven alternations "between periods of concern for the rights of the few and periods of concern for the wrongs of the many."¹ The average length of the periods was, Schlesinger noted, almost seventeen years.

According to conventional wisdom, we have so far seen six political cycles during the twentieth century: the Progressive era, 1901-1919; the Republican restoration, 1919-1931; the New Deal era 1932-1947; the reaction against liberalism during the 1950s; the dynamism of the New Frontier and the Great Society in the 1960s; and the revival of conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s, reaching a peak in the election of Ronald Reagan. Of course, this way of structuring history is simplistic and open to a number of objections. Still it may be useful, if only for educational purposes.

The swing of the pendulum usually carries with it substantial changes in terms of both policies and voter attitudes. During the years of the Reagan Administration, however, this pattern has only partially been visible. True, the Reagan program meant the biggest and most far-reaching set of policy changes since the New Deal. But these changes have not been supported by a majority of the voting public.

Scores of public-opinion polls show that the American people, contrary to widely held beliefs, have not moved to the right during the last decade or so. Instead, the recent "right turn" in American politics is a consequence of a realignment of business elites.

This bold and rather novel thesis is put forward in *Right Turn*. Those who wish to keep up-to-date with the how's and why's of contemporary U.S. politics cannot afford to neglect this work. Ferguson and Rogers present an interesting analysis of some of the most important current trends, most notably the decay of the Democratic Party and the rise to power of a well organized, business-dominated center-right party system. Furthermore, the book is well written and invokes objections on the part of the reader by virtue of its straightforward and closely argumentative style.

In the first chapter we are introduced to some influential businessmen, bankers, and intellectuals, who purport to be Democrats but whose prime objective is to

shift the party's course to the right. The authors label them "revisionists," and describe their policy goals as being close to those of conservative Republicans. Ferguson and Rogers try to argue – and I think quite successfully – that many of the revisionists' claims are either false or dubious.

The revisionists' central argument is that the American voters have now broken with the policies and aims of the New Deal. People no longer believe in social spending programs, an active state, business regulation, redressing income and welfare inequalities, etc. The Democratic Party must follow suit and change its policies accordingly.

Ferguson and Rogers agree that the policy initiatives of the Reagan years announce the end of the New Deal era in American politics. The "New Deal party system," they argue, has finally collapsed. The American political system has "realigned," as political scientists often put it.

Still the authors insist that mass public sentiment has not turned against the domestic programs of the New Deal, or even the most important components of the Great Society. The basic structure of public opinion in the United States has remained quite stable in recent years. Moreover, within this basic structure the main trend in public opinion over the past generation has been toward greater liberalism. Thus, there "has been no right turn in public opinion corresponding to the right turn in public policy" (p. 13). In sum, there has been *policy* realignment but no *voter* realignment.

Ferguson and Rogers' survey of public-opinion polls seems on the whole to confirm their argument. For instance, during Reagan's first term public support for regulatory and social programs actually *increased*. A 1983 poll, for example, showed that only 5 percent of Americans found regulations "too strict," while 42 percent thought they were "not strong enough." Support of social spending programs was similarly broad. In early 1983, 74 percent of the public supported jobs programs even if it meant increasing the size of the federal deficit. A January 1986 survey found, furthermore, that voter attitudes showed "no consistent evidence of change, certainly not in a conservative direction," over the course of the Reagan Presidency (p. 16).

The picture does not fundamentally change when we turn to foreign policy. A clear majority of the public has been against the Administration's policy as regards El Salvador and Nicaragua. In 1984 no less than 67 percent were opposed to the mining of Nicaragua's harbors by the U.S. Despite Ronald Reagan's frequent talk about the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," survey data indicate that overwhelming majorities of Americans, while continuing to disapprove of the Soviet system of government, are very reluctant to prompt a showdown with the U.S.S.R. and urgently wish to live at peace with it.

The authors also address the widespread notion that Ronald Reagan is the most popular President during the entire postwar period. This contention is simply false, if opinion polls are to be trusted. During his first term in office, Reagan's approval rating averaged 50 percent, which was lower than the averages for Eisenhower (69%), Kennedy (71%), Johnson (52%), and Nixon (56%). Jimmy Carter, who has been described as an especially unpopular President, had an average of 47 percent.

Reagan's peak had been reached as early as March 1981, when he recorded a 68 percent approval rating. That is not a particularly impressive figure. Four out of five other elected postwar Presidents achieved significantly higher peaks – Eisenhower (79%), Kennedy (83%), Johnson (80%), and Carter (75%). Why these data have not been more widely discussed and reported in the media remains a mystery.

There is, however, a puzzling problem here. If Reagan does not have a magical hold over the American electorate, and if his policies are not very popular among a majority of the voters, then how did he succeed in winning two landslide victories in the Presidential elections of 1980 and 1984? Ferguson and Rogers explain this by referring to one critical issue: the economy. They view the 1980 election as a referendum on Carter's bad economic performance. Four years later, during an economic boom, the Democrats offered no alternative but Walter Mondale's promise to raise taxes. Faced with a choice between someone who promised them little besides higher taxes and someone who rhetorically championed economic growth and lower taxes, the voters, quite rationally, opted for the incumbent.²

On the whole this seems like a plausible line of reasoning. Several studies confirm the importance of economic performance in voter approval of elected officials, in the U.S. and elsewhere. But this does not exhaustively explain the Reagan phenomenon. What we have here is a complex set of voter attitudes and emotions, which go beyond the concern for jobs, inflation, income increases, and so on. These attitudes, which must be taken into account when dealing with Reagan's apparent success, are seldom discernible in ordinary polls.

The most interesting segments of the book deal with the crucial role of money in American politics. The authors' description of a right-of-center business group within the Democratic Party, with a dominant influence upon the nomination and election of candidates, is especially intriguing.

Ferguson and Rogers' conclusion, however, is more debatable. They argue that the new and more conservative political order, which has emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, is likely to be maintained. Those social forces who are interested in altering it are simply too weak to do so. "America," so the study ends, "will continue its right turn" (p. 219).

This strikes me as being not too optimistic or pessimistic but, rather, too deterministic. Politics is determined not only by existing structures and the role of politicians within those structures, it is also shaped by ideas, debates, and passionate opinion-making. In an age of conservatism and free-market philosophies, notions of fairness, justice and equality have been fighting an uphill battle. But that may soon change. The heavy pendulum of history, after a period of careful examination of existing circumstances, usually tends to alter its position.

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NOTES

1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986, p. 24.
2. Cf. Thomas E. Cronin, "The Presidential Election of 1984," in Ellis Sandoz & Cecil V. Crabb, Jr., eds., *Election 84: Landslide Without a Mandate?* New York and Scarborough: A Mentor Book, 1985, pp. 33-36.